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RIPIN YARN FROM RUSSIA

SCMP Reporter
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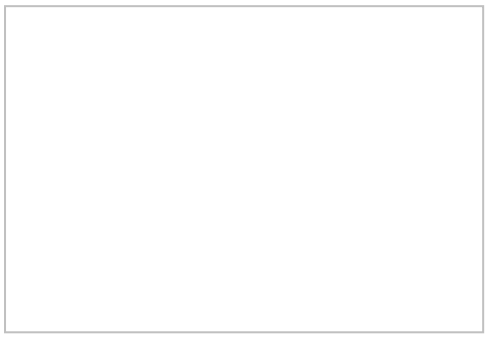

DETRACTORS accuse Vladimir Ripin of being a KGB officer, nuclear weapons smuggler, pimp and all-round bad guy guilty of importing the Russian mafia to Macau.

By implication he is also embroiled in the mystery surrounding the double murder of Hong Kong lawyer Gary Alderdice and his Russian girlfriend, Natalia Samofalova, who were shot in Vladivostok on June 24.

The tales about Bob, as he calls himself, make better reading than many spy novels. The only problem is, he denies it all.

Sitting in a restaurant in Macau last week, Mr Ripin spoke to the Sunday Morning Post in an attempt to clear his name and sort out any 'misunderstandings' with other Russians in Macau.

'I tell you,' he said, speaking English in a stilted, heavily accented voice, 'these things are not true.

'I was never in the KGB. In Russia I studied Chinese in Vladivostok and I started to make business for the Friendship Society in Russia and China.

'I think somebody wants to make the story like a movie - to put oil on the fire.

'Even the police asked me to go to see them to make things clear. I hope people start to trust me.' Evidence they do not trust him is abundant. According to Mr Ripin, recently a group of people in a bar started throwing 'things' at him as soon as they recognised him.

'For me it is very difficult, people think I make money from prostitution,' he said.

'This is not true . . . I already have my money from China.' He also denies he is dealing in 'red mercury'. Russian criminal groups say this substance can be used to detonate nuclear devices, a claim rejected by experts.

'I have heard it is very expensive,' he said. 'But I have also heard it does not exist.

'But I tell you one more time, I never take a risk in this business. I prefer to deal in clean profits.' Mr Ripin said he left Vladivostok after the abortive Russian coup in August 1991 which later led to the fall from power of Mikhail Gorbachev. It was Mr Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika which sparked the exodus of entrepreneurs from the depressed Russian Far East to Macau.

He saw the Portuguese enclave, which reverts back to China in 1999, as the ideal base to set up a trading company using his language skills and contacts on the mainland and in Russia. Blond-haired Mr Ripin, who wears a diamond-studded gold ring and watch, said he first went to China in 1981 and has been many times since on business.

Before Macau he made a $500,000 profit selling Urea fertiliser to China. He used the money to start several ventures in Macau including shipping hard-to-get goods to Siberia.

However, Mr Ripin does not deny that when he arrived in the enclave he worked for the China City nightclub group as an 'interpreter' and that he helped hire Russian girls.

He said his job was to arrange for 'dancers' and 'hostesses' to be sent from Vladivostok to work in the thriving nightclub near Macau's ferry terminal.

However, Mr Ripin's work links with China City, which earned him up to $30,000 a month, have been terminated following the allegations against him. His residency permit is also under review.

MR RIPIN denies he worked as a pimp and said his job at the nightclub was just one of a number of ventures he was involved in.

He also denies knowing Hong Kong barrister Alderdice who was shot in what is believed to be a robbery while visiting his Russian girlfriend, Samofalova, in Vladivostok.

Their bodies were discovered by the dead woman's mother and a neighbour on June 24, only two days after the New Zealand lawyer, who moved to Hong Kong in 1973, had arrived in the Russian city.

Mr Ripin said he was in Thailand at the time of the killings.

The couple met at the Skylight Disco - a rival to China City - in the Hotel Presidente where Samofalova worked as a hostess.

'Employees' there can earn up to $54,000 a month. However, the pimps take $37,000 leaving the women with only $17,000.

Mr Ripin, meanwhile, did acknowledge he knew two other men linked to him in press reports about Alderdice and the 'red mercury'.

He said the men, Igor Deordienko and Nicolai Arzamassov, who he claims work for a big trading company in Vladivostok, were business partners.

Their ship, the Bureya, which Mr Ripin says was carrying a cargo of lemons to Vladivostok some time between 1992 and last year, was the target of a joint Hong Kong Special Branch and Criminal Investigation Bureau probe into the smuggling of red mercury.

No action was taken on the Bureya but two Russians who transit the region and are believed to use Macau as a base are under investigation by the Special Branch.

'Igor and Nicolai came to Macau to see the lemons being transported,' Mr Ripin said. 'To check the quality.' He said he made $250,000 on the deal and had hoped to continue the trade through his firm, Valta, but that was now on hold.

As for the Guinea Bissau passport he travels on, Mr Ripin told the Sunday Morning Post it cost him $100,000.

'I was going to be making business in Guinea Bissau, I was not going to be the consul,' he said referring to another rumour about his plans. 'It is not my style to be consul.' In an attempt to clear his name Mr Ripin has filed a complaint to the Macau police about a Filipino, Carmencita de La Cruz, accusing her of rumour-mongering.

Ms La Cruz, who is involved with an art gallery in the enclave, is married to a Russian, Valeri Gorodiski. Mr Gorodiski works for the Tonnochy nightclub.

Mr Ripin's lawyer, Helder Fraguas, said he filed the complaint against Ms La Cruz on September 30 alleging that 'this lady was the source of the information which he [Mr Ripin] denies'.

Mr Fraguas said Mr Ripin was also seeking compensation 'regarding the damage he has suffered. Later, this procedure will be followed up by the prosecutor's office'.

Asked why he wanted to discuss his background, Mr Ripin said: 'Because I want to show the people I have good feelings for them . . .

'At the moment I am only thinking about how I can stay in Macau and keep in touch with my partners.

'If I get my residence [permit] I will start my activities.'

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